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Subject: ICYMI: Bloomberg -New GMO Cotton Could Give Farmers Leg Up in Endless Weed Fight

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By Tiffany Stecker

- USDA approves a genetically modified cotton seed to help farmers fight weeds
- New cotton trait is resistant to potentially carcinogenic herbicide

A newly approved cotton seed that resists two different herbicides will help farmers struggling against stubborn weeds, the Agriculture Department announced July 24. .

The USDA will deregulate cotton, developed by Bayer CropScience, that is genetically modified to withstand the herbicides glyphosate and p-hydroxyphenylpyruvate dioxygenase (HPPD) inhibitors.

"Farmers are increasingly challenged by threats to their crops like weeds and bugs in their fields and need new tools with multiple modes of action to combat them," Bayer CropScience spokesman Darren Wallis said in a statement.

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service determined that the product is "not likely to pose a plant pest risk," a key hurdle to putting it on the market. Cotton farmers are particularly sensitive to weed growth, the agency said in its environmental assessment, because their slow-growing crops are planted early in the season and can't compete with fast-sprouting, aggressive weeds.

HPPD inhibitors work by blocking an enzyme that weeds and other plants need to grow. The most common herbicide in this class, isoxaflutole, is used primarily throughout the Midwest and in northern Texas.

Next Stop: EPA

Bayer must now request a label modification from the Environmental Protection Agency, the federal regulator of pesticides, to permit the use of isoxaflutole-based herbicides with the newly deregulated cotton, according to USDA's environmental assessment. The EPA didn't immediately say when it might make a decision on label changes to the pesticide.

More than 500,000 pounds of isoxaflutole, which the EPA considers a probable human carcinogen. were used in 2015, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

The approval of isoxaflutole-tolerant crops is worrisome to environmentalists such as Bill Freese, a science policy analyst with the Center for Food Safety.

"It doesn't break down very quickly and can get into groundwater," Freese told Bloomberg Environment.

Pesticide companies have developed new and reformulated herbicides to help farmers kill weeds that no longer respond to glyphosate, the main ingredient in Monsanto Co.'s Roundup.

"Repeated use of single herbicides in cotton production over the past several decades has led to the evolution of [herbicide-resistant] weed biotypes that no longer respond to the herbicides that producers previously relied upon," USDA regulators wrote in the assessment.

Bayer and the biotechnology company MS Technologies are marketing a soybean resistant to HPPD inhibitor herbicides, glyphosate, and a third weedkiller called glufosinate.

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